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How Can K–12 Principals Support Student Success and Well-Being?

Interviews with Parents to Support Equitable and Culturally Responsive Leadership

Trudy is a single mom of two elementary-aged children living in California. Every morning, she rushes them through a hurried routine of getting dressed and signing their homework logs so she can get them to school breakfast and still be on time for work. When she drops off her kids at 8:00 a.m., the principal helps with the car door and greets them by name. On the other side the country, in Florida, it is already 11:00 a.m. Tod gets a call from his 7th grade son's principal. There was an incident during gym. "Yes, I know," says the principal. "It seems unusual

for your son. Can you come in so we can talk it through together?" Somewhere else in the United States, a bell rings. Around 3:15 p.m., Sarah sees a text from her daughter's high school. Another lockdown. Sarah's heart skips a beat. Everyone is safe, but there was an altercation outside the school in their small town in Nebraska.

Scenes like these play out across the United States in K–12 schools every day. According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 49 million K–12 students are enrolled across approximately 99,000

KEY FINDINGS

- Parents from across different contexts said that principals support the academic success and well-being of students in three ways: promoting teaching and learning, building familiarity and rapport, and supporting diverse groups of learners.
- Most parents do not expect a lot of personal interaction with their child's principal. However, most said that they hope that the principal is a familiar figure and that the principal has a friendly relationship with their child. Parents hope that their child's principal will contact them directly if there is a concern.
- When a student does need support, how a principal engages with that student and their parents can substantially shape the trajectory of that child's school experiences. Parents told us that these types of interactions are not typical, which is part of why they matter so much.

Abbreviations

ALP	American Life Panel
ES3	Equity Standard 3
IEP	individualized education plan
K-12	kindergarten through grade 12
NPBEA	National Policy Board of Education Administration
PSEL	Professional Standards for Education Leaders
SWDs	students with disabilities

public schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-a; National Center for Education Statistics, undated-b). Behind every school is a principal,¹ or team of principals, whose job is to make sure that students and staff have what they need to thrive. Whether it is interacting with students and parents, as illustrated previously, or working behind the scenes to support teachers, the approaches that principals take to fostering the ideal conditions for teaching and learning matter in a big way for students (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay, 2021).

As public schools become more diverse across all dimensions and as the challenges facing schools and students become increasingly complex, so too grows the need for principals to ensure that their leadership practices are equitable and culturally responsive (Leithwood, 2021; Minkos et al., 2017). Geneva Gay (2000) originally applied the term *culturally responsive* to describe teaching that builds on students'

cultural backgrounds and experiences to enhance learning against the backdrop of persistent racial and socioeconomic inequities in the United States.² Equitable and culturally responsive school leadership requires principals to know who their students are, what each student needs, and how to meet these needs (see Box 1).

To help principals navigate these critical areas of practice, the National Policy Board for Education Administration (NPBEA) provides guidance for school leaders in its Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL) (NPBEA, 2015). PSEL Equity Standard 3 (ES3) specifies that “effective education leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.” ES3 includes a list of eight elements (i.e., principles of practice) that NPBEA suggests are indicative of equitable and culturally responsive leadership (see Box 2). How principals enact these elements depends on the unique circumstances of their school communities (Murphy, Louis, and Smylie, 2017; NPBEA, 2015).

This report is part of a broader effort spearheaded by NPBEA to help principals apply ES3. It is intended as a starting point for principals and those that support principals to reflect, through the eyes of a diverse group of parents, on approaches they can use to support students’ academic achievement and well-being. Parents and other family members have unique insight into their children’s cultural backgrounds, needs and strengths, and community contexts (Minkos et al., 2017). Therefore, acknowledging the perspectives of parents and understanding their thoughts on how principals can support students could yield critical insights for principals seeking to enhance their application of ES3. In this report, we address two questions:

- What are parents’ hopes and expectations for how school principals are supporting the academic success and well-being of their (i.e., the parents’) children?
- What kinds of actions meet or exceed parents’ expectations of their child’s principal? What lessons can be inferred from stories parents shared about times a principal exceeded their expectations that align with NPBEA’s ES3?

BOX 1

Equitable and Culturally Responsive Leadership

- *Equitable leadership* ensures that all students have what they need to achieve academic success and well-being.
- *Culturally responsive leadership* recognizes and builds on students’ unique experiences, culture, and backgrounds as assets for learning.

NOTE: These definitions are drawn from the language NPBEA uses to describe equitable and culturally responsive leadership in ES3 (see NPBEA, 2015).

BOX 2

Example PSEL ES3 Elements

Effective leaders . . .

- ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of their culture and context
- ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success.

NOTE: See NPBEA, 2015, for the complete list of elements.

To answer these questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 parents in spring 2023. We recruited these participants through RAND’s American Life Panel (ALP), which is a nationally representative, probabilistically sampled panel of more than 5,000 participants. We drew a purposeful sample of participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, regions of the United States, income levels, age range of children, and genders. All participants, whom we refer to as *parents*, were primary or secondary caregivers for at least one child age 5 to 18 enrolled in public school.³ After the interviews, we qualitatively analyzed the data to extract key themes. Our findings are drawn from questions we asked parents about how their child’s principal should support their child’s academic success and well-being and about times when principals met or exceeded these expectations. We also asked parents to share their perspectives about selected actions aligned with ES3.⁴ For more information about our methods, see “How We Conducted This Analysis.”

Our sample is small by design, and thus our findings are not representative of the opinions and experiences of parents nationally or by parent sub-populations. Instead, we believe that these findings illustrate the types of expectations that parents in the United States might have when interacting with their child’s school principal. Where possible, we provide illustrative examples from our data of principal practices that we identified as aligned with ES3, especially those that we recognized as relevant for persistently underserved student groups. However, we remind readers that equitable and culturally responsive lead-

ership depends on various interrelated factors (e.g., student characteristics, principal demographics and background, lived experiences) (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis, 2016). Therefore, except in a few qualified instances, we do not present findings by parent sub-populations. Principals should interpret our findings through the lens of their own diverse school contexts.

We begin this report with a discussion of parents’ hopes and expectations for what they believe principals should be doing to support the academic success and well-being of their children. Second, we describe the types of everyday principal-student and principal-parent relationships that parents said are supportive of their children along with actions parents said principals can take to develop these relationships. Third, we explore steps that parents said are effective when a student is in trouble or needs help. We conclude with a set of considerations based on our findings for principals seeking to enhance their application of ES3.

To contextualize our data for principals, we characterize our findings through a series of fictionalized vignettes. We adapted this approach from Kaufman et al. (2023). The individuals featured in these narratives are not real; however, their perspectives and experiences are composites constructed from those of multiple parents. All quotes came from our interviews.⁵ Using this approach, we aim to demonstrate the similarities we observed across parents while preserving a sense of the diversity of their experiences and perspectives.

Parents Said That Principals Support the Academic Success and Well-Being of Their Children by Promoting Teaching and Learning, Building Familiarity and Rapport, and Supporting Diverse Groups of Learners

When we asked parents what they hoped and expected principals were doing to support the academic success and well-being of their children, most provided responses that reflected overall expectations for their children’s school experiences. In addition to sharing actions that they hoped their child’s principal

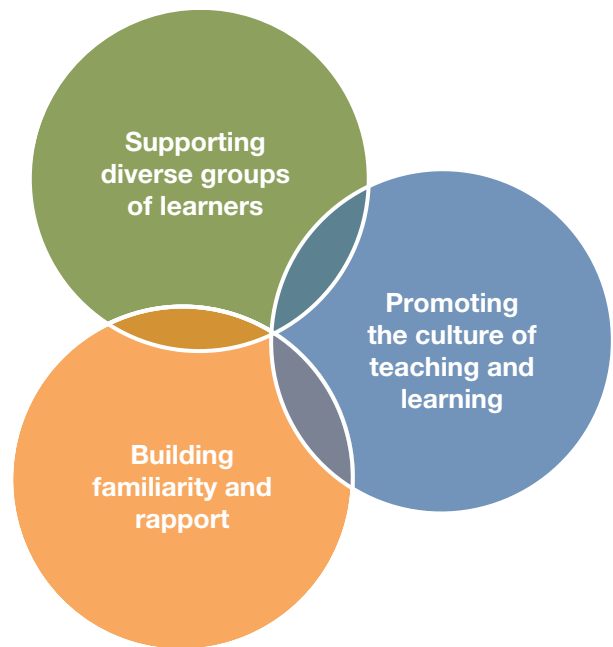
would take, many parents also described signals (i.e., visible indicators) that their child’s principal was an effective manager of the aspects of schooling they care about (e.g., welcoming environment, friendly staff). The activities and signals parents described fell under three categories: *promoting the culture of teaching and learning* for all students; *building familiarity and rapport* with individual students, staff, and parents; and supporting *diverse groups of learners*.

As illustrated in Figure 1, some of the activities and signals that parents described spanned multiple categories. Although parents’ responses differed somewhat based on their child’s age and needs, our data suggest that most parents tend to view actions across these three categories as interlinked components of an overall supportive school environment for all students, including their own child. Except for the few instances we highlight below, we did not observe obvious differences in how parents across different subgroups talked about their hopes and expectations for principals during these portions of our interviews. We provide concrete examples of specific ways parents said principals can support children from persistently under-

“There is little turnover at the elementary school, which makes me think the principal is a good boss I think he has fostered a nice atmosphere. I don’t know how, but my child tells me he spends all day hopping in and out of classrooms.”

— Elementary school parent

FIGURE 1
Principal Actions Parents Say Are Supportive of Student Success



served groups in the “Supporting Diverse Groups of Learners” section.

Parents’ perceptions of how principals support academic success and well-being touch on areas that previous research has identified as critical for effective school leadership, such as how principals support instruction, demonstrate “a sense of caring,” communicate effectively, and address diverse needs (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood, 2021; Smylie, Murphy, and Louis, 2020). In vignettes 1 to 4, we illustrate how parents in different contexts described their experiences and expectations for principals across our three categories. These vignettes draw on common stories from multiple parents.

Promoting the Culture of Teaching and Learning

As illustrated by the vignettes, nearly every parent we spoke with said that they hoped their child’s principal was performing actions related to promoting the culture of teaching and learning at their child’s school. These types of activities included

Illustrations of Common Parent Experiences and Expectations for Principals

Vignette 1. A Busy, Full Life in a Large Southwestern City

Ingrid is the parent of a 4th grader. She is single and her grandmother's long-term caregiver. Ingrid is happy that the school her son attends is relatively diverse. She thinks of the principal as "the boss of the teachers" and hopes he provides them with resources and support "so students get what they need." She appreciates how her son's principal welcomes students at drop-off and keeps parents updated through social media. Ingrid does not have any specific concerns but wishes the school would do more to challenge her son in math. She has spoken with the teacher about this, but she is not sure what the teacher—or her son's principal—could do because her son's class is so large.

Vignette 2. Holding It Together in a Small Southern Town

Rich's youngest daughter is in 7th grade. Rich believes his daughter is talented, but he is worried. His wife has been ill and his daughter is growing increasingly distant. "I wish the school had more therapy and knowledge toward mental health, because it gets pushed to the side out here." Rich has not had much interaction with the principal, except once last year when his daughter got caught skipping class. He thinks it would be helpful if the principal spent more time in classrooms engaging with students. He also wishes the school offered more activities, such as sports or art. He does not think his daughter's school provides enough outlets for students, especially for girls.

Vignette 3. College-Bound in a Midsize Midwestern City

Julie is the proud mother of a high school sophomore. Julie appreciates how her son's principal sets "a high bar" for achievement and takes steps to ensure the availability of Advanced Placement and college-preparatory courses. Julie used to work in a school, and she thinks it is important for principals to be visible to students, observe teachers, and provide them with feedback to improve their instruction. She wishes discipline measures were tighter and worries about school safety and security. "I don't mind if the principal doesn't know who I am. Just make sure you take care of my son." She thinks providing mental health supports for students who need them is a key factor.

Vignette 4. Special Needs in a Northeastern Suburb

Ben has three kids. His oldest daughter, who is in 11th grade, has special needs. Because of her disability, she tires easily and often misses school. Ben thinks it is the principal's responsibility to hire teachers whose philosophies align with the mission and vision of the school. Personally, Ben has not had any contact with his daughter's current principal. "We might get an email or a newsletter, but I don't think we've had any sort of direct touch point with the administration." Ben remembers how his daughter's middle school principal used to stop by her classroom. "My daughter loved it." He hopes his daughter is developing the skills she will need to live independently.

- championing the vision and goals of their child's school
- supporting teachers and holding them accountable
- promoting order and safety, so students can focus in class.

Parents had different perspectives about the teaching and learning elements they believed were important (e.g., some parents said learning should be fun while others talked about academic rigor),

however, their responses suggest—and researchers agree—that the role that principals play in reinforcing standards for instruction is vital (Gates et al., 2020; Leithwood, 2021).

Championing vision and goals: Like the fictionalized parents in vignettes 3 and 4, most of the real parents with whom we spoke believed that principals can support student success by taking such actions as broadcasting mission and vision during school events and messaging expectations to parents through mass

“It is a matter of just greeting them in the morning so everyone knows the principal’s face. . . . Several times, I have heard conversations where the principal has said, ‘Nice game, [football player]. I heard the play went well.’ Things like that.”

— High school parent

emails, hiring staff whose professional philosophies align with the mission of the school, and positively reinforcing student achievement.

Supporting teachers: More than one-half of the parents we spoke with said they hoped their child’s principal was observing and meeting with teachers, providing teachers with resources, or supporting teacher well-being. As illustrated by vignette 1 and vignette 3, there was a subtle difference in how parents talked about the purpose of these activities. For example, although most parents focused on support

and well-being, other parents were more concerned with accountability.

How principals support instruction is not always visible to parents. Effective principals perform many complex and technical tasks (e.g., using data to drive instruction, observing teachers) (Grissom et al., 2021). Although parents might not be aware of the degree to which principals perform evidence-based tasks, our data suggest that parents rely on other signals to infer whether their child’s principal is taking the necessary steps to support academic success (see Figure 2).

Promoting order and safety so students can learn: A large portion of parents said that principals need to focus on making schools secure and classrooms safe so that students can focus and pay attention to their schoolwork. Parents in this group, most of whom were parents of middle or high school students, talked about the importance of principals taking action to maintain order, tamp down on bullying, and ensure the security of the school building.

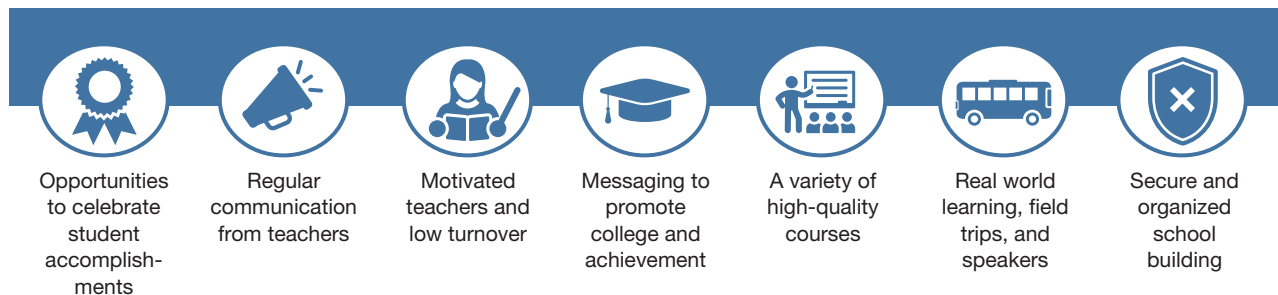
Building Familiarity and Rapport

In addition to overseeing the daily operations of running a school, most parents said it was also important for principals to focus on building familiarity and rapport with students, parents, and staff members. According to the parents with whom we spoke, principals can achieve this by

- interacting with students
- being present at key times (e.g., school events, drop-off) and visiting classrooms

FIGURE 2

Signals to Parents That Their Child's Principal Is Promoting a Culture of Teaching and Learning



NOTE: This figure illustrates some of the signals that multiple parents (three or more) mentioned as indicators that their child’s principal is working behind the scenes to support academic success and well-being, which fall under the umbrella of promoting the culture of teaching and learning.

- providing staff and parents with transparent communication.

When it comes to supporting students' academic success and well-being specifically, one-half of the parents with whom we spoke said that one of the most important things a principal can do to support students is to be visible and make themselves more accessible to each student. When we asked parents why, a few said they believed that being present is an important component of creating an overall welcoming environment for students. Others said it was important to them that their children have a trusted adult they could turn to for support. A few said interacting with students served as positive reinforcement that reduces the chances of future conflict.

Parents' responses suggested that many view student-principal interactions as a precursor for developing a "knowingness" about students in line with ES3, which principals need to do their job effectively. For example, a few parents said that principals should know how students act inside and outside class so they can advise teachers. Other parents described how, when they needed to meet with a principal, to their pleasant surprise, the principal already knew their child. These descriptions are roughly consistent with what other research has termed "feeling the pulse of the school" (Lavery and Hine, 2013; Lineburg and Gearhart, 2008).

Supporting Diverse Groups of Learners

Finally, most parents also mentioned specific types of supports or opportunities that were available or that they wished principals would make available to nurture the academic success and well-being of different types of learners, including their own children. As illustrated in the vignettes, parents know that some children may at times require more attention from the principal to have their individual needs met. Parents in this group suggested that principals achieve this effort by

- coordinating differentiated supports and resources
- providing activities and experiences for diverse interests

"The IEP meetings? My child's principal was always present. Knowing how many students they have over there and everything . . . I loved her for that. The fact that she understood [my child's] personality. [The principal] was able to speak with the teachers, and she understood my child."

— Elementary school parent

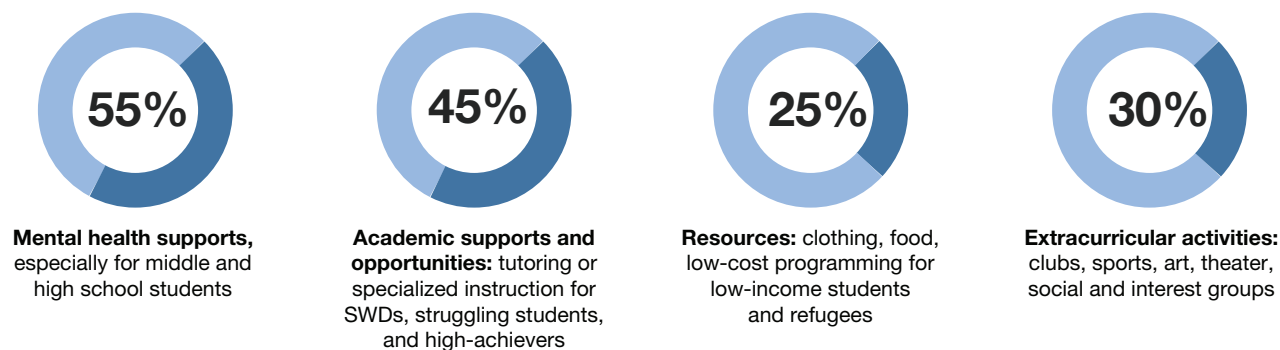
- celebrating cultural diversity and promoting inclusive practices.

The specific types of supports and opportunities that parents said are important are listed in Figure 3. Most parents do not expect principals to directly administer supports and programs; however, they do expect principals to partner with teachers or other staff to identify students who might benefit from these opportunities. Some parents in this group also said it was important to involve parents if there is a concern about their child.

The types of supports that some parents described and the role these parents believed principals should play in procuring those supports differed subtly depending on their children and family context. For example, parents of students with disabilities (SWDs) tended to talk about times when a principal succeeded or failed to effectively advocate for their child's needs through such actions as initiating individualized education plan (IEP) meetings, providing appropri-

FIGURE 3

Types of Supports Parents Said Were Important for Diverse Groups of Learners



ate accommodations, and providing special education teachers with adequate guidance and resources.

Likewise, parents who mentioned recent hardship (e.g., death of a family member, divorce) tended to stress the need for in-school mental health supports with comparative urgency. A few parents emphasized that extracurricular activities should be free and convenient for single and working parents, so that their children could participate. A few parents mentioned a need for tutoring programs for the parents of English learners and students in language

immersion programs; although, our sample did not include any parents of English learners.

As illustrated in vignettes 1 and 2, parents might not always know how to advocate for the right supports or have knowledge of existing supports. A few parents told us they were not inclined to initiate contact with their child’s principal for support because they did not perceive the principal as approachable, were unsure whether the principal could help, or had previously been unable to reach the principal. This finding suggests that principals have an important role to play in being proactive in working with parents to connect students to resources and supports.

Celebrating diversity and promoting inclusive practices: A few parents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (i.e., both White parents and parents of color) felt strongly about the need for principals to take steps to support persistently underserved student groups, including students of color and SWDs, by creating opportunities to celebrate culture and identity, providing anti-bias training or training to promote inclusive teaching practices, or embedding opportunities into the curriculum for students to explore diverse perspectives. Research backs all these efforts as effective strategies to support inclusivity, diversity, and promote educational equity (Singmaster, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Although we include this topic here, the way parents talked about these activities overlap with the types of activities discussed under the category of promoting the culture of teaching and learning. (For more information on what parents said about these topics, see Box 3 and Figure 4.)

“You need [to talk about] diversity because the world is diverse. . . . You need children to understand that not everyone is the same shape, color, or nationality. They don’t believe the same things. But we still want to respect one another.”

— Elementary school parent

Parents' Comments on How Principals Can Create Welcoming Environments for Students from Diverse Backgrounds

Only a few parents mentioned actions that we identified as explicitly indicative of culturally responsive leadership (e.g., providing anti-bias training or resources for staff) as a top hope or expectation for their child's principal. However, given the reality of rapidly diversifying school populations and the focus of this report, we examined parents' perspectives about topics related to culture and diversity more deeply through a short series of questions derived from the language of ES3 (see "How We Conducted This Analysis"). Using parents' responses, we offer the following takeaways:

1. Most parents in our sample said it is very important for principals to ensure a welcoming and affirming environment for all students and think that one way principals do this is by being visible and accessible. A few described instances when their child's principal took steps to create a welcoming environment for specific student groups. For example, one principal established a seating area during lunchtime for students who celebrate Ramadan. Another provided coats to refugee students to combat Midwest winters.
2. Parents' responses indicated that most think it is at least somewhat important for principals to be generally aware of the cultures and values represented among the student body; however, few parents mentioned specific preferences based on their own culture or values. Some parents, including White parents and parents of color, said a basic awareness of cultural differences may help principals more effectively support students from diverse backgrounds or ensure students were treated respectfully. A few parents from all racial and ethnic

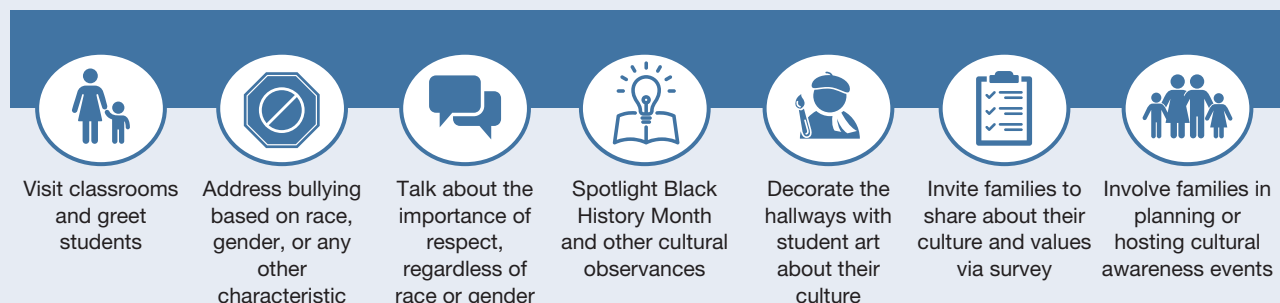
backgrounds indicated that they had mixed feelings about this topic or said that it was more important that principals treat all students fairly.

3. Most parents also said it is at least somewhat important that their child's principal encourages learning that exposes students to diverse experiences and perspectives of people from different cultures, races, and genders. However, parents' reasoning and the emphasis they believed these topics warranted differed. Some parents, mostly parents of color or parents of biracial children, said that exposing students to diverse cultural perspectives fosters self-acceptance and acceptance of others. A few parents, both White parents and parents of color, suggested that learning to interpret the world through multiple perspectives was an important skill. A few others said that, although it is important for their child to understand differences, this should not be the principals' primary focus.

Parents' responses suggest that when it comes to cultivating inclusive and affirming environments, most would agree that it is at least important for principals to ensure that all students and staff feel safe and respected, regardless of their differences, and that respect and empathy are important life skills that students need to be productive members of society. The approaches that principals take related to these topics should be driven by the needs of real students, which should be informed by parents and students themselves. In Figure 4, we illustrate approaches parents mentioned that principals could use to create welcoming environments for all students, foster respect, and expose students to diverse perspectives.

FIGURE 4

Approaches to Creating Welcoming Environments, Teaching Students to Respect Others, and Encouraging Opportunities That Expose Students to a Diverse Range of Perspectives



NOTE: Each approach in this figure was mentioned by one or more parents.

“A lot of people, the students, look at the principal like they look at the police. Some people see the police and they tense up and get afraid. Other people see the police as friendly and open. I would like for [the relationship with the principal] to be friendly and open.”

— Elementary school parent

Parents Do Not Expect Much Direct Interaction with Their Child’s Principal, but Most Hope the Principal Has a Friendly Relationship with Their Child; If There Is a Concern, Parents Hope the Principal Will Contact Them Directly

To clarify the types of encounters that parents felt were supportive, we asked parents to describe: (1) specific actions they hoped for in terms of how principals interacted with them and their child and (2) how frequently and under what circumstances they interacted with their child’s current principal. Overall, parents’ responses suggested the following:

- Most parents hope the principal has a friendly relationship with their child.

- Few parents expect frequent or extended personal interactions with their child’s principal—and most of the time, this is just fine.

Most parents, especially high school parents, said that the size of their children’s schools made it difficult, if not impossible, for principals to know all the students and every parent on a personal level. A few acknowledged that the amount of interaction they and their child had with the principal probably depended on grade level and the size of the school. Compared with parents of other grade levels, middle school parents seemed less sure about what level of engagement with principals was reasonable to expect, having just transitioned from smaller elementary school settings with higher levels of principal engagement. We found that parents’ responses about the types of expected actions from principals suggest that just a little bit of relational effort goes a long way in terms of making parents and their children feel safe and supported. We explore this topic in more detail in the next section.

Saying Hello, Giving High-Fives: Most Parents Think These Gestures Matter

When we asked parents how they wanted principals to interact with their child, most parents talked about the importance of small gestures. For example, exchanging jokes in the hallway, giving students high-fives in the morning, and greeting students by name. Most parents thought it was important for principals to directly engage with students, even if these interactions were brief or infrequent. Parents in this group said that their children felt known by principals who occasionally asked them how they were doing or knew their names. Only a few parents wanted more interaction than this. For some parents, just being a friendly face for their child was all they expected. Some suggested that too much interaction with a principal would indicate that their “child was a troublemaker” or believed the principal had more-important responsibilities to attend to than engaging with their child.

Most Parents Think That Basic Engagement with Them Is Fine; However, Parents Expect Transparency and Want Principals to Be Responsive When There Is a Concern

As illustrated in our vignettes, most of the parents we interviewed said that the bulk of their engagement with principals occurred in friendly-but-brief encounters at school-related events (e.g., drop-off, sports games) or through mass communications from the principal about school happenings. Occasionally, these basic interactions were punctuated by more-intense periods of one-on-one engagement that resulted from a conflict or crisis. For most situations, these patterns of engagement are what parents from all backgrounds expect and appreciate from their child’s principal (see Figure 5). A few parents did not know the principal or were unsure if they had interacted with the principal.

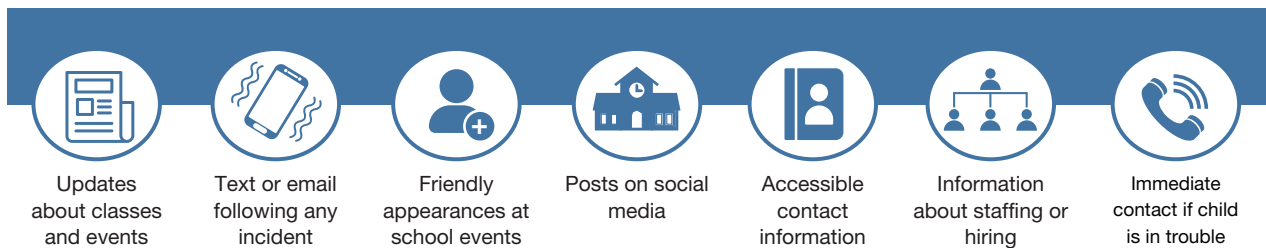
Parents’ responses indicated that transparency and responsiveness were important. Parents appreciate timely information about school programming, hiring decisions, and staff turnover. A large portion of parents said that such signals as being cordial and honest, responsive to emails, or providing photos of what students are doing in class makes them feel like welcomed contributors to their child’s academic success and well-being. For example, one parent explained that her principal’s use of social media provides talking points to reinforce learning at home.

“[We] just need the basic communication. We don’t need a phone call every week. Just that once-a-quarter face-to-face and communication through social media and text.”

— High school parent

Approximately one-quarter of our sample acknowledged a preference for more direct or regular communication with their child’s principal. Most parents in this group were parents of SWDs or parents of students experiencing hardships, including significant mental health crises or personal loss. As the parent of one student with special needs in high school explained, it was important for him, as a parent, to understand how his child was doing in school so that he could make sure his child was safe and making progress. He also noted that it was the responsibility of the principal to be checking in with the parents and teachers to make sure both parties felt supported and that the needs of his child were being met.

FIGURE 5
Types of Everyday Engagement That Parents Appreciate



NOTE: This figure illustrates some of the types of specific approaches multiple parents (three or more) indicated that they appreciate or would appreciate from their children’s principal.

When a Student Needs Support, How a Principal Engages with That Student and Their Parents Can Shape the Trajectory of That Child’s School Experiences; Parents Said These Interactions Are Not Typical—Which Is Why They Matter So Much

After parents shared their hopes and expectations for their child’s principal, we asked parents to share examples of times that principals met or exceeded these expectations. Nearly half of the parents we interviewed recounted times their child was struggling or in trouble and how the way their child’s principal managed the situation made all the difference for their child and family. We refer to these as *pivotal interactions*. The types of pivotal interactions shared by parents in this group varied from scenarios involving unmet learning needs or misunderstandings between peers to more-serious situations involving

“Remember, [our child] has special needs. . . . We want to know everything they can share with us so we can share it with our child.”

— High school parent

student mental health and school discipline. Sometimes, these situations were intertwined. Vignettes 5 and 6 illustrate two fictionalized—but common—examples (see Superville, 2023, for more information about the surging mental health crisis among youth).

What is noteworthy about vignettes 5 and 6 (and the stories real parents shared) is how—in the minds

Common Examples of Pivotal Interactions Between Students, Principals, and Parents

Vignette 5. A Too-Common Mental Health Crisis in a Mid-Atlantic Suburb

Carol has a 16-year-old daughter in high school. Carol and her daughter live with Carol's sister and her sister's two children. Carol has never interacted with her daughter’s principal but has occasionally engaged with the vice principal. A few weeks ago, her daughter confided to a teacher her intentions to take her own life. This was after another student had posted comments on social media about her daughter’s appearance. Carol found out from the vice principal who called her right away, explained to Carol the various options for addressing the situation, and provided Carol with support as they talked through the necessary steps for keeping her daughter safe. The vice principal helped Carol remain calm by assuring her that "everything was okay." Carol got her daughter into counseling right away.

Vignette 6. A Good Student Makes a Mistake in a Northern Midsized Town

Jim's 11-year-old son is a 6th grader who rarely gets in trouble—except once. A few weeks back, Jim received a phone call from his son’s principal. His son had been involved in spreading hurtful rumors about another student. The principal invited Jim to come in for a meeting that afternoon. “The principal took the necessary time out of her day so we could have a conversation and have that conversation directly with my child.” The principal invited Jim's son to share his side of the story and seemed familiar with his son’s character. “The principal didn’t just talk to us about policy. She heard me and my son as human beings.” The principal had assured Jim that his son would get a chance to make amends when the other student was ready to reconcile and that this would not affect his permanent record.

of parents—singular interactions with their child’s principal improved the trajectory of their child’s experience amid otherwise emotionally fraught circumstances. For example, several parents described times when they met with a principal who agreed that their child had an unmet learning need that required something different. For a few parents, the principal helped initiate the process of evaluating their child for special education services. In other cases, the principal switched the child’s teacher or worked with the child’s current teacher to build in additional supports.

Similar to vignette 6, other parents talked about an instance in which their child was called to the principal’s office because of a poor choice or inappropriate behavior. Instead of simply meting out punishment, the principal invited parents to share their perspectives, applied discipline fairly, and treated the experience as a learning opportunity for their child. Previous research confirms that similar approaches may be especially important for ensuring fair treatment for students of color (Fenning et al., 2004). A few other parents shared how a principal took the lead on supporting their child through a difficult time, either with an extraordinary gesture or communicating more frequently to ensure their child’s safety.

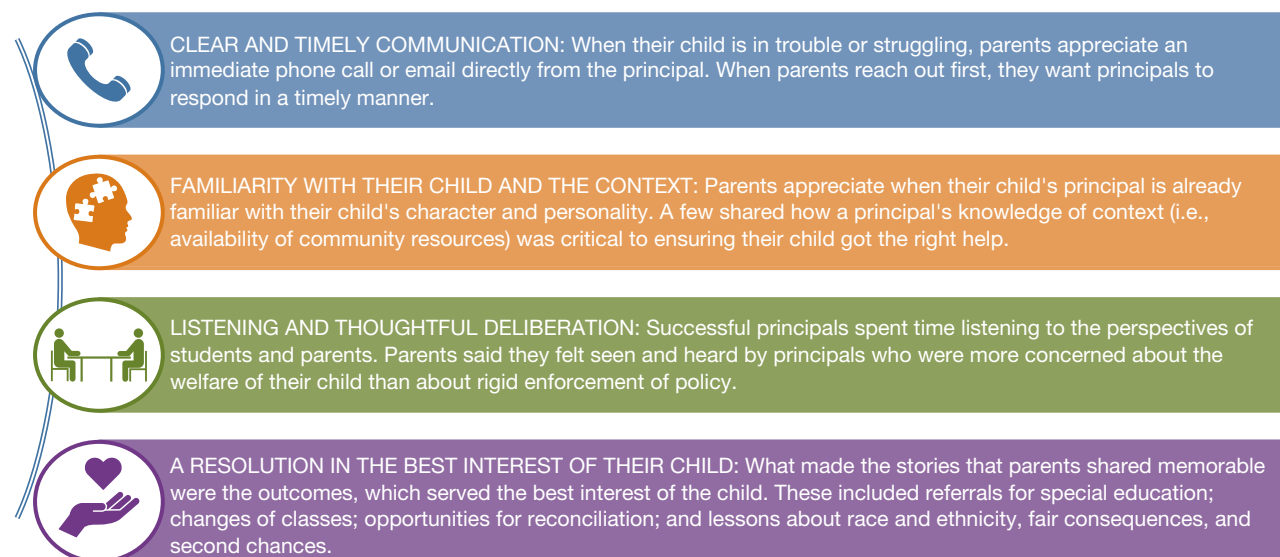
“We found out at the meeting that the principal actually knew a lot about our child. That was really gratifying.”

— Elementary school parent

What made these interactions successful from the perspective of parents? As demonstrated by vignettes 5 and 6, parents seemed to value four approaches that we interpreted as inclusive of parents and supportive of students as individuals. These approaches are (1) clear and timely communication with parents, (2) familiarity with their child and the context, (3) listening and thoughtful deliberation, and (4) a resolution in the best interest of their child (see Figure 6).

Most parents seemed to regard pivotal interactions as “anomalies” and separate from their everyday interactions with principals. For example, despite having engaged with their child’s principal at these deeper

FIGURE 6
Actions Parents Believe Are Supportive When Their Child Is in Trouble or Needs Help



“The principal called us in. He said, ‘Here is what we are going to do.’ Then, they put tutoring in. They took care of it . . . that led us to testing and that is how we knew my child needed an IEP.”

— High school parent

levels, with few exceptions, parents still said they did not have much interaction with their child’s principal, even though the outcome meant a great deal to them and their children. Although more work is needed to understand the degree to which principals could use similar steps to solve problems of practice related to diversity, equity, and cultural responsiveness, the extent to which parents mentioned these factors in our study suggests broad alignment with ES3.

In addition to these pivotal interactions, a few parents shared stories about times a principal exceeded their expectations by advocating on behalf of certain student groups, including students of color and students who are transgender. For example, two parents described instances in which their children’s principals, both of whom our participants identified as people of color, took action to promote understanding between members of the school community from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. They did this by sharing their lived experiences and, in one case, creating opportunities for students from different backgrounds to engage in productive dialogue, which led to strengthened relationships between students from different racial backgrounds. Although too few parents shared examples of this type for us to draw broad

conclusions, we noticed that what seemed to impress parents was the matter-of-fact, but also relational, approach that their child’s principal took to advocating for students.

Considerations

This report is part of a broader effort by NPBEA to help principals translate ES3 into action. The findings in this report are merely a starting point to assist principals as they reflect on their own practices by providing insights from parents about ways principals can support the academic success and well-being of their children. For principals working to apply ES3, we offer four considerations from our interviews with parents. Because equitable and culturally responsive leadership is context specific, principals should consult with members of their own school communities about ways they can tailor these considerations to meet the specific needs of diverse groups of students and families in their own contexts, especially students from persistently underserved groups.

Consideration 1: Many parents from across different backgrounds believe that one of the most steps a principal can take is to be visible and make themselves accessible to students. Parents recognize that principals have a myriad of important tasks; however, most parents want their child’s principal to be a familiar and friendly figure to their child. For most parents, small gestures and simple acts of acknowledgment translate into building supportive relationships. Parents told us that they believe that these kinds of interactions make their child feel seen, help their child view the principal as trustworthy, and provide the principal with a sense of knowingness about all students, which parents believe principals need to make informed choices about how to support teachers and individual students.

Consideration 2: Most parents believe that students with diverse needs should get the supports they need to be successful—and most hope that principals are working to facilitate those supports. Depending on school context, this effort

“It was very effective when the principal gathered parents in advance [of teaching about gender identity]. There were different opinions, but . . . I think the principal was professional. She just said, ‘Well, this is the curriculum that we put a lot of thought into, and we engaged a specialist, and this is the curriculum that most aligns with our school’s philosophy.’”

— Elementary school parent

could include ensuring that students’ needs are met, ensuring that high-quality tutoring and enrichment activities are free and accessible for students from low-income backgrounds, providing mental health supports, and paying extra attention to the needs of SWDs. Parents emphasized the role that principals play in noticing and identifying specific needs and using this knowledge to support teachers and facilitate students’ access to supports. In particular, principals are “on the frontlines” of confronting serious mental health challenges, including teen depression and suicide, addiction, and mental illness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). It is essential that principals—everywhere—be equipped with the knowledge and resources needed to support students in these areas (Superville, 2023).

Consideration 3: When a student is in trouble or struggling, parents’ responses suggest that how the principal engages with that student can have profound implications. Research confirms that this is especially true in cases of school discipline for students of color (Kostyo, Cardichon, and Darling-Hammond, 2018). It is during these pivotal interactions that the need for familiarity with students is most important. Parents told us how they are surprised and relieved by principals who (1) call them right away when something happens at

school that involves their child, (2) already seem to know who their child is and the resources available at the school or in the community, (3) listen carefully and give them a chance to share their perspectives, and (4) identify a resolution that is in the best interest of the child. Because of the adaptability of these approaches to a variety of situations and their inherent focus on students and families in their individual contexts, principals looking to enhance their application of ES3 could consider adopting similar approaches in their own context.

Consideration 4: Principals should not underestimate the importance of transparency and making themselves accessible to parents, especially with those who may have had negative school experiences. Parents want to support their child’s success at home. From our interviews we learned that many parents feel they can do this more effectively with clear and transparent information about school happenings and events from their principal. Messages immediately following school incidents make them feel safe and like the principal is someone they can trust. When a student is struggling or in trouble, parents want direct communication. Numerous resources exist with guidance on how to build partnerships between families and schools (to get started, see (Jacques and Villegas, 2018; Mapp and Kuttner, 2013).

More research is needed to confirm and expand on the findings presented in this report. Although our findings are illustrative of the different types of perspectives parents have about the role principals play in supporting children, these findings do not reflect localized perspectives of parents at individual schools. Moreover, because of the small sample size ($n = 20$), the findings we present here are not generalizable across all parents. Future research efforts should leverage larger and more representative samples of parents or, if possible, include multiple parents

per school to obtain a fuller representation of perspectives on a given principal's leadership. As school demographics shift and the challenges confronting students, schools, and families evolve, principals will require better information to inform their support of students and better tools to collect this information. We strongly encourage principals to interpret our findings through the lens of their own unique school context. This itself embodies the spirit of ES3.

How We Conducted This Analysis

We collaborated with NPBEA staff to develop a semi-structured interview protocol but retained final editorial control of the questions. In our interviews, we focused on two substantive topics: (1) parents’ hopes and expectations for how principals should support their children’s academic success and well-being and (2) illustrations of these expectations “brought to life.” For context, we asked parents about their goals for their child, whether their child participated in special programming (e.g., special education, language immersion, accelerated programs), how frequently they engaged with their child’s principal, and how they expected principals to interact with children. We also asked their beliefs about the importance of selected principles aligned with ES3. We did not collect information about principals’ race and ethnicity or gender, unless parents shared this with us. Prior to conducting interviews, we piloted our questions with a group of five parents selected from the ALP. We made edits to the structure and content of our final protocol based on the pilot feedback.

In spring 2023, one qualitative researcher conducted all 20 interviews by phone or videoconference; each interview lasted 45 minutes. We defined *parents of color* in this report as participants who self-identified as Black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, or Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander (see Table 1). Drawing on the methods described in Doan et al. (2022), we recorded and transcribed all interviews and organized participants’ responses into a spreadsheet separated into topics guided by our research protocol. To

identify the top hopes and expectations parents have for how principals should support the

academic success and well-being of children and ways principals exceed these expectations, the members of our team separately reviewed the responses of all participants to two of our key questions: (1) our final question, in which we asked them to summarize their top two or three takeaways from the conversation about their expectations for how principals can support the academic success and well-being of children and (2) a question in which we asked for examples of times a principal has exceeded their expectations. We clustered their responses into themes and used these themes as the basis for an inductive coding scheme to characterize parents’ overall hopes for how principals support the academic success and well-being of children, which we iteratively revised prior to coding.

After revising our coding scheme, interviews were coded by a team member, the results of which we checked against another team member’s understanding of the data through a series of report outlines. The findings reported here are the themes related to our research questions that were most frequently discussed by parents, which we confirmed by looking for similarities and repetition across our entire data set. To ensure the integrity of our results, we looked for both confirming and disconfirming evidence (Doan et al., 2022). When we discuss the results from our interviews, we use “most” or “more than half” to refer to more than half of respondents, “nearly half” or “a large portion” to refer to eight or nine respondents, and we use “some” or “few” to refer to fewer than eight respondents, with “some” meaning more than “few.”

The size of our sample means that our findings are not representative of parents across the United States or of subgroups of parents. As explained previously, we did not, except in a few rare instances, present findings by subgroups. The few exceptions we made to this rule occurred when individuals with a similar attribute (e.g., child’s grade level, race or ethnicity, child’s specific need) (1) shared a notably unique perspective, (2) this perspective was plausibly associated with the shared attribute, and (3) we felt that clarification was required to enhance the applicability and accuracy of our findings. Finally, we remind readers that interview responses are prone to response bias, including selective recall and social desirability bias (Bergen et al., 2020).

TABLE 1
Parent Characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage
Gender	Male: 20%; female: 80%
Race/ethnicity	Non-Hispanic White: 50%, Latino or Hispanic: 25%; Black or African American: 20%; Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander: 5%
School types ^a	Elementary school: 35%; middle school: 40%; high school: 50%
U.S. region	Southeast: 20%; Northeast: 30%; Midwest: 25%; West: 10%; Southwest: 15%

^a Some parents had multiple children and subsequently reported multiple school types.

Notes

¹ In this report, *principal* refers to administrative school leaders, including vice or assistant principals.

² Gay's work is associated with and frequently cited alongside Gloria Ladson-Billings' seminal work on culturally relevant pedagogy (see Will and Najarro, 2022).

³ In this report, *primary/secondary caregiver* and *parent* refer to biological, foster or adoptive, and/or adult extended-family members (e.g., grandparents) who have or share primary parenting responsibilities for one or more children living in their immediate household. All participants in our sample confirmed they played an active role in their child's school experiences.

⁴ Our findings from ES3-specific items are located in Box 3 near the end of the report to distinguish these from the actions that parents said were their top priorities during the open-ended portions of our interviews.

⁵ Throughout the report, we replaced personal identifiers in quotations with generic terms (e.g., my child, my child's principal) to preserve participants' identities.

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About This Report

This report is part of a larger effort by the National Policy Board for Education Administration (NPBEA) to support principals' application of Professional Standards for Education Leaders Equity Standard 3. To elucidate parents' perspectives on how principals can support the academic success and well-being of children, we conducted interviews with parents recruited through RAND's American Life Panel (ALP), which is a nationally representative, probabilistically sampled panel of over 5,000 participants who are regularly surveyed by researchers. For more information on the ALP, see www.rand.org/rand-alp.

RAND Education and Labor

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